A NEW POINT OF VIEW

October 6, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
John 17:20-23

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation."
-2 Corinthians 5:16-17 (NRSV)

It's not easy to say goodbye. Some people never do it. Most of us overdo it. When the kids leave we try to get all the important advice into one sentence: "drive carefully, go to bed on time, brush your teeth, remember to eat vegetables, study, call home."

...A "goodbye" is always a time to summarize in some way what has transpired, and to give expression to hope for the future.

"Do come back... let's do this again... Good luck... God speed..."

The last time Jesus was with his friends, it's called "the Farwell Discourses" and it's a rambling sequence of last minute advice during the evening meal which will be their last supper - although they do not know it at the time.

And at the end of these farwell discourses, Jesus prays for his friends and by extension, prays for us.

This is what he said:

> "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may be all one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know

> that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." [John 17:20-23 NRSV]

So when the topic is unity we are not dealing with some hair-brained scheme cooked-up by a bunch of over-zealous, ecclesiastical bureaucrats bent on creating a mammoth super church, with a new Protestant Vatican in New York probably. When the topic is unity, we are talking about something so dear to the heart of Jesus that he's praying for it literally hours before his own death. And furthermore, just like the preacher whose pastoral prayers wander into the political and social implications of the particular petitions which are being laid before the throne of grace... "Dear God, give us clarity and wisdom on election day so that Senator so and so may continue his good works." (That's prayer on the way to politics.) ...just like that, Jesus asks God to make the disciples one, to keep them together, the disciples and everyone who comes after - "so that the world may know that you sent me." God didn't need that reminder. They did apparently. We do, obviously. The unity of the disciples of Jesus is the best way to tell the world about God's love. And if you accept that, you have a problem with disunity among Jesus' disciples, a permanent case of heartache and shame because of what the world sees when it looks at Christians and therefore what it is not hearing about the love of God.

> "...that they may be perfectly one so that the world may believe."

In The Education of Little Tree, by Forrest Carter (a book I read and loved this summer, but which yesterday's newspaper announced may be a hoax, and may be written by a pretty unsavory character, but which remains a good book) a little boy is raised by his Cherokee grandparents, in the mountains of Tennessee during the Great Depression. They live in a cabin, far away from the mainstream of life. They hunt and trap and farm a little - corn mostly, for the purpose of grandpa's business which is producing the best corn liquor in the mountains. The story is narrated by Little Tree. This is from a chapter on "church-going": People are scattered in the mountains, so there is only one church to serve them all.

> "Grandpa said that preachers get so taken up with themselves that they got the notion they personal held the door handle on the pearly gates and wouldn't let nobody in without their say-so. Granpa figgered the preachers thought God didn't have nothin at all to do with it.
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> "All the Baptists believed in baptizing, that is, getting total sunk under the waters in a creek. They said you could not be saved without it. The Methodists said that was wrong: that sprinkling on

top of the head with water done the trick. They would each whip out their Bibles in the church yard to prove out what they said.

"It 'peared like the Bible told it both ways; but each time it told it, it cautioned you had better not do it the other way or you would go to hell. Or that's what they said it said.

"I determined that I was not going to have anything atall to do with water around religion. I told Granpa it 'peared to be the safest thing to do, as you could easy get shipped down to hell, depending on how the Bible was thinking at the time.

"Grandpa said if God was as narrer-headed as them idjits that done the arguin' about piddlin' such, then Heaven wouldn't be a fit place to live anyhow, which sounds reasonable.

"Grandpa said I had just as well forgit about the water situation. He said he had totally give up on it a long time ago and felt better since that time.

"He said he, privately speaking, couldn't reason as to what in the hell water had to do with it.

"I felt the same way and so give up on the water." [Forrest Carter, The Education of Little Tree, p. 152-160, excerpts]

"I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them..." [John 17:23]

I suppose there are few Biblical ideas that have been more thoroughly ignored, or worse yet, vigorously violated. Why do we have such trouble with this simple little priority of Jesus - that they all be one?

Douglas John Hall who teaches on the faculty of McGill University in Montreal, thinks that the problem is that we have an almost inherent difficulty in thinking wholistically about anything.

Most of us, says Hall, whether we are in the supermarket or voting booth, are still living on a "flat earth with nicely segregated sections."

Only partially facetiously, Hall says the most valuable spin-off of the space program is a simple picture of the earth, a bright, fragile, incredibly beautiful sphere against the black background of infinity; no boundaries, no walls, no divisions. There are no corners on the globe; there are no moats or oceans broad enough to divide; there are no parts... To see that single photograph is to know the absolute truth of Economist Barbara Ward's famous warning: "You are one world. You must learn how to be one, or else you will not be at all." [See Douglas John Hall, The Steward, p. 127-132]

Why can't we think globally? It may be **the** question. Our tradition suggests that it has to do with individual egotism: everybody in the world thinks in terms of me and mine first. Christianity calls that sin and I continue to believe it is one of the most politically and economically relevant ideas around. Hall says Westerners are addicted to an adolescent notion of individualism that starts with the individual and never gets any further than clan, tribe, ethnic group or nation. And I was reminded that it wasn't that long ago that "one worlder" was regarded as a subversive notion, that world organization, the United Nations, the World Council of Churches, the World Court, UNICEF, were the target of blistering polemics from the radical right.

Whatever the reason, it is no longer an academic matter because all the separate parts are armed to the teeth... spending precious resources as quickly as they can be generated to produce more weapons - spending at a world-wide rate of 1.8 million dollars a minute for armaments, sitting on 55,000 nuclear weapons with a combined force of 16 billion tons of TNT. Whatever the reason, the parts are not fighting one another, as they used to in the good old days, through surrogate, mercenary armies engaged in combat on a neutral field. In fact in modern warfare as it is practiced this year 80% of the casualties are civilians. It is no academic matter. There is a new world order emerging and in some places like Yugoslavia, it is emerging within racial and ethnic borders which have historically been more than willing to kill and to die for the tribe, the race, the ethnic group. So when the President of the United States, as he did two weeks ago, takes a major step back and away from the nuclear nightmare, it is an occasion for profound gratitude and for people who are ordinarily lamenting the state of the world to give voice to their support and encouragement.

What the global village needs more than anything else is a new view of itself...that picture from space, for instance, and what it further needs is individual men and women willing to take a very different view of things.

"How good it is to be in unity," the Psalmist wrote. And the Scriptures consistently hold up a vision of the reconciliation of all the parts, the breaking down of walls of

hostility... not just between individual believers, but the oneness, the unity of all things, all people, all nations, all of creation.

A few years after Jesus prayed for the unity of his disciples, St. Paul wrote some letters to the small groups of believers - churches - he had helped to establish. Those little churches had two problems - internal and external: how to get along with one another inside the community and how to relate to a huge and threatening and hostile world outside. To one of those churches which was having a particularly difficult time with both of those challenges, the church in Corinth, he wrote two letters. And in the second one he said something so good, so provocative and breath-taking that we're still saying it, often times right in that moment in worship when we have told the truth about ourselves and are waiting to have a word of truth about God.

Paul wrote:

> "From now on we regard no one from a human point of view... if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation - so we are ambassadors for Christ - ambassadors of reconciliation."

I have a confession to make. I've been reading that passage wrong. I heard it right for the first time this week.

> "In Christ there is a new creation."

I always thought that meant the other guy, who when he or she accepts Christ, gets "in Christ," becomes a new creation and is now in the church, inside the tight little circle keeping us safe inside and the world out. I always thought being an ambassador for Christ meant getting everybody inside the circle.

That's not it. That's wrong. That's the opposite of what Paul was trying to say. The new creation in Christ is you and me. We are the ones who no longer see people from a human point of view, as insiders/outsiders, them/us, Christians/Muslims, Catholics/Protestants, blacks/whites, saved/damned. No more of that! That's the old creation which, in Christ, died on a cross. There is a new creation in Christ and in it there are no boundaries, no walls of hostility. The creation is wide open. Anyone who wants to be in is welcome and, from God's point of view, in already, and the task for those of us who know about this new creation is not to get everybody inside the circle or over the wall, but to make sure that the circle is wide enough for all, and that there is no barrier, no wall to divide God's holy creation, and to separate God's daughters and sons from one another.

I've always loved this day - World Communion Sunday. I think it's because sometimes I know on this day the mystery of

God's new creation. Sometimes on the first Sunday of October, with the bread and wine on the table and with the reminders of humankind's marvelous diversity in the liturgy, I know I am actually standing in the presence of something new and glorious.

It requires a conversion. It requires letting go of the old point of view, the old way of defining people on the basis of national and racial and religious differences. And it means opening our hearts to the radical good news that in the new creation of Jesus Christ we are a blessed unity. We are one. We are, by his grace, brothers and sisters, part of one family of humankind.

So do come and know this mystery. Come to his table and eat bread and drink wine and hear again his words, his prayer for us - "that they may all be one so that the world may believe."

Amen.